



Inyo County is Taking the Initiative with At-Risk Youth

FEBRUARY 6, 2019 DAVID LIEBLER

When you sit down and talk with Inyo County’s Rehabilitation Specialists about the impact they are having on local youth, they are modest in their response. But their success is anything but modest. Formerly classified as juvenile correction counselors who worked inside Juvenile Hall, these specialists now work out in the community and are playing a pivotal role in the Inyo County Juvenile Services Redesign Initiative’s success at helping turn around the lives of youth before they end up in the adult correctional system.



With declining numbers of youth having to be detained in the local detention center, Inyo County set out to redesign its juvenile services in order to make better use of resources. The result is a proactive, collaborative program that works with youth out in the community rather than waiting for them to become part of the system.

“We made a conscious decision that we were going to reinvest the cost savings we had achieved by repurposing the Juvenile Hall into services for the children,” Supervisor Jeff Griffiths explained. The County is now able to provide services and programs to twice as many area youth in a single month than were previously provided in an entire year.

The Probation Department’s rehabilitation specialists work closely with the County’s Health and Human Services staff, as well as local school administrators to reach the youths in need.

“The collaborative partnership is very important. We have to have a good working relationship with our school partners because we are going into the schools,” Chief Probation Officer Jeff Thomson explained. “With Health and Human Services, we capitalize on some of their strengths especially in substance-abuse counseling.”

Students as young as fourth grade are referred by educators. In-school services include journaling, drug and alcohol prevention education, bullying prevention and other cognitive behavior programs.

“We all have the same goal. We want them to grow up and be successful. We don’t want them falling through the cracks,” Rehabilitation Specialist Tabitha Warner.

Supervisor Griffiths agreed. “If we get to the children at a young-enough stage, we can provide them with better options in life. And that’s a public-safety benefit for the whole community.”

A key component of all of this is the strong bond the rehabilitation specialists build with the youths, who are quick to talk about the difference the program has made in their lives. In discussions with them, it’s obvious they have seen a boost in their self-esteem and now have a more optimistic outlook on the future. They are also beginning to make better choices.

“The relationships we are building with the youth is just tremendous,” Thomson said. “Just showing them that we care, that they have a voice. And if they have some issues or concerns, they can come talk to somebody. If there’s one positive person in their lives that can help turn them around, that’s such a huge success for us.”

Peja is 14 years old; her face lights up when she discusses the relationship she has been able to develop with the rehabilitation specialists. Without this program, “I would be down in the gutter . . . I would be ditching school. I wouldn’t be thinking about a future that would be great for me,” she said.

For 16-year-old Fernando, “the difference between the things I was taught and what I am now learning has made a huge difference in my life.”

The youths are quick to give credit to the rehabilitation specialists for these positive changes.

"It touches my heart to think that someone may have taken something I said to them and be able to use that in their future," Warner said.

The program is picking up momentum. "Kids know who we are and what we are all about. And the word gets passed on," explained fellow Rehabilitation Specialist Alejandro Quezada.

As for the previously under-utilized County's Juvenile Center, it was converted to a special purpose facility; memorandums of agreement were entered with other rural counties in order to detain youth that need this sort of corrective treatment.

Inyo County officials are hopeful their new, proactive program will keep the need for the Center's usage to a minimum.

This Inyo County program is a recipient of a 2018 CSAC Challenge Award, which spotlights the most innovative programs in county government.